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ABSTRACT

A preliminary study assessed the efficacy of pre-service and in-service early childhood education programs centered on a policy of combining philosophy, theory, and program practice. Questions were designed to: (1) provide data to be used to determine whether early childhood teachers used an understanding of curriculum philosophy and theory as a basis for program planning; (2) generate information related to the topic of program planning; and (3) permit the development of an instrument that could be used throughout the early childhood field as a basis for gathering data for the purpose of enhancing university in-service and pre-service curriculum planning courses. Results of the pilot study supported the notion that some early childhood educators use an understanding of curriculum philosophy and theory as a basis for program planning. Whether this knowledge is related to participants' pre-service or in-service education, or a combination of the two, remains unclear. (RH)

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CURRICULUM DECISION MAKING IN AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS: DO EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS REALLY PLAN FROM A THEORETICAL BASIS?

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Introduction

In Australia, as elsewhere, early childhood teachers and caregivers are concerning themselves with questions relating to the concept of 'professionalism'; it does not seem possible to attend an early childhood conference of any note in Australia without having the opportunity to attend a session devoted to professionalism. One of the ways in which we can debate this concept is by identifying criteria for professionalism and while there is considerable lack of agreement relating to these criteria there are several which appear to be agreed to by all; namely, that professionals possess knowledge and skills which no one else can demonstrate and that professionals possess a desire for self enhancement, thus ensuring that these knowledge and skills are maintained and continually augmented during the person's period within the profession.

Combined with this push towards professionalism has been an acknowledgement that the early childhood field itself has changed dramatically over the past twenty-five years; the conception and implementation of the Head Start and Follow Through programs in U.S.A. have led to new ideas in the area of program development for young children. Firstly, the early childhood field has accepted the value of what Seaver and Cartwright have described as: *"program diversity in place of the zealous search for the best or universally appropriate"* program (1977:306) and at the same time the early childhood field has attempted to specify what constitute the dominant theoretical bases for these new programs. While some of the model Head Start programs subscribed to more than one developmental theory to describe their 'modus operandi', it seems clear that most people accept that contemporary early childhood programs have, as their genesis, behaviourist, maturationist or cognitive theories of development.

A third area of consensus among early childhood professionals at the preservice level is the growing awareness that these various theories of development cannot be 'tacked' onto existing concepts of program planning; preservice students have to be guided towards developing their own professional philosophy in order to be competent to work in a variety of early childhood services and programs. This implies that students need to be exposed to a range of developmental perspectives in order to foster pluralism and diversity in program practice in early childhood programs. The nexus of philosophy-theory-program practice is therefore the objective of the preservice program offered at the School of Early Childhood Studies (SECS), University of Melbourne, as a way of offering flexible programs to meet a variety of community needs and as a means of reinforcing the notion that professionals possess a particular body of theoretical knowledge.

This 'philosophy-theory-program planning' policy was initiated in both preservice and in-service programs at programs at SECS in 1983. This study is a preliminary attempt to determine the efficacy of the existing process.

Method

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The methodology employed in this segment of the study attempted to do three things:

1. provide data to determine whether or not a small sample of early childhood teachers used an understanding of curriculum philosophy and theory as a basis for their program planning;

2. generate information specifically related to the topic of programming per se from the same small sample of early childhood teachers; and

3. permit the development of an instrument which could be used throughout the entire early childhood field as a basis for data gathering in order to enhance courses in curriculum planning currently taught at tertiary level at both the preservice and in-service levels.

The instrument used consisted of a prepared structured questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and forced-choice questions. This ensured a data bank of responses for comparison as well as providing opportunities for respondents to elaborate on their forced-choice questions if they desired.

This simple information-gathering tool asked respondents to complete details of their relevant qualifications, recent in-service activities and to describe the basis on which they worked when planning appropriate learning experiences for the children. These are issues which were highlighted as being relevant to the stated objective, viz., to determine whether kindergarten teachers use philosophical knowledge about curriculum theory as a basis for program planning.

The open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate in terms of their own experiences, their attitudes about program planning and their perspectives on the importance of curriculum theory as it related to programming; that is, the open-ended questions offered a more complete picture of the early childhood field's attitude to this notion as well as providing a method of targeting relevant groups for further in-service work in Victoria in this area of program planning.

It was hoped that the data would form the basis for sequenced tertiary courses at the preservice and in-service levels in the area of program planning so that they epitomise the early childhood worker as possessing a solid basis of theory from a range of disciplines on which to base their practical outcomes, which is in keeping with the concept of the early childhood teacher as a professional.

As the SECS does not possess any detailed information relating to the years of teaching of early childhood educators it was decided to enlist the assistance of the Kindergarten Teachers' Association of Victoria (KTAV) which has details of years of teaching, current addresses, etc., of its members. Accordingly the KTAV sent out anonymously 60 surveys to members who had completed their preservice training prior to 1983, and 60 surveys to members who completed their training post-1982. The results were disappointing, 9/60 responses from pre-1983 cohort and 17/60 from the post-1982 cohort. Accordingly, a further 100 surveys were distributed at random from SECS lists of practice teaching supervisors. This ensured some kind of quality control but it was not able to control the size of the cohort to which the respondents belonged. The responses from the second mailing resulted in an additional 12 in cohort A and 5 in cohort B, making a total of 21 in cohort A (pre-1983) and 22 in cohort B (post-1982). These cohorts are now similar in size (21 and 22) but the response rate was disappointing, indicating either a lack of interest in KTAV/SECS-initiated surveys, an inability to spend time on such an activity or a lack of interest in the topic under review.

Results and Discussion

The qualifications of the respondents were as follows:

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

It could be assumed that the majority of respondents who had completed a B.Ed. (43.33% of Cohort A and 13.63% of Cohort B) had been exposed to at least one course related to Curriculum Theory and Programme Planning, while the remainder of Cohort B should have completed a similar course at the preservice level. It may not be the case, however, as the responses of several members of Cohort B indicated that they had completed their preservice training at an institute other than IECD/SECS.

The majority of Cohort A had taught for at least 11 years (85.71%), and if we were to use Katz's (1977) criteria for the developmental stages of early childhood teachers, we could assume that most of these people had reached the final developmental stage of Maturity, as opposed to the Survival, Consolidation and Renewal stages. Katz suggested that the maturity stage is the final stage of development in which teachers have come to terms with their role as a teacher.

> *She now has enough perspective to begin to ask deeper and more abstract questions, such as; 'What are my historical and philosophical roots ... Is teaching a profession?* .....
>
> *Throughout maturity, teachers need an opportunity to participate in conferences and seminars and perhaps work towards a degree ... to read widely and to interact with educators working on many problem areas on many different levels.*
>
> (Katz, 1977:11)

Katz pointed out that teachers at the Maturity stage would find seminars on child development meeting the needs of individual children, etc., 'very tiresome'. This is an interesting commentary when we look at the kinds of in-service programs undertaken by teachers from both cohorts.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

While all teachers attended Regional Teachers' Meetings (which are compulsory and held in work time) a significant percentage of teachers from both cohorts attended one day and half day seminars, short courses and public lectures which would constitute the main source of input on the philosophical underpinnings of curriculum.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

However it should be noted that almost all teachers had attended at least one seminar/workshop on 'activity areas', e.g. art, music, science, first aid, in the past two years, while presentations on children with special needs and behaviour management were well attended by members of both groups.

It may be that in-service presenters perceive that these are the areas of greatest interest to early childhood teachers at all levels of experience and expertise,

so that teachers are maintained at the early developmental levels described by Katz (1977) as the Survival and Consolidation stages.

It is interesting to speculate on the 85.70% of Cohort A who rated the influence of in-service on their program planning as 'great' or 'somewhat', considering its basic 'hands on' content as reported in table 3.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

The process used by both cohorts on which they base their planning revealed similarities and differences; over half of each cohort attested to the fact that they based their planning on children's needs and interests, while over one quarter of each cohort relied on a 'thematic' approach to planning. However 1904% of Cohort A used their professional values and philosophy as an important component of program planning whereas only 9% of Cohort B saw values and philosophy as important, in spite of the fact that they would have been more likely to be exposed to these concepts at their preservice level of training than would their older peers. It could be explained by referring to Katz's initial developmental stage, Survival, in which day by day strategies are paramount, and to which many of Cohort B could belong.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

However, this conclusion is not supported by the 27.2% of Cohort B who are prepared to operate from a basis of yearly goals which imply a long term commitment to their programming task.

The final question related to the role of philosophy in the teacher's program planning; a resounding 71.42% and 63.63% respectively, attested to the fact that their philosophy had an important role to play. However, respondents either did not elaborate on this statement or provided vague answers, e.g. "In general terms I think so," "Yes in terms of my expectations of the children", or "Yes I have a simplistic approach to planning".

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

However a further group from both cohorts supported the need for a philosophical basis for program planning (19.04% and 31.81% respectively) at the same time providing tangible statements relating to the reasons for this statement, e.g. "Yes, I believe in the development of the whole child", "Yes, all planning will be developed according to your philosophy" and "Yes, I support the Interactionist theory", "I am a Humanist". It may well be that many of the other cohort members who responded affirmatively held similar views but they could not be determined from the responses. A follow-up might ascertain this, but as the KTAV questionnaires were sent anonymously, this is not possible.

Conclusion

The pilot study offered some data to support the notion that some early childhood educators do use an understanding of curriculum philosophy and theory as a basis for program planning. Whether this knowledge is related to their preservice or in-service education, or a combination of the two, is unclear. A follow-up would be necessary to determine this.

TABLE 1

Qualifications	Cohorts			
	A pre-1983		B post-1982	
Dip. KTC	6	28.57%	0	0%
Dip.Teaching	6	28.57%	19	86.36%
Dip.Teaching/B.Ed	7	33.33%	3	13.63%
Dip. KTC/B.Ed	2	10.00%	0	0%
	N =21		N =22	

TABLE 2

Inservice	Cohorts			
	A pre-1983		B post-1982	
1. Regional Teachers' Meetings	21	100%	22	100%
2. State EC Conferences	4	19.04%	2	9.09%
3 National EC Conferences	3	14.28%	0	0%
4. One day seminar	18	85.71%	18	81.81%
5. Half-day seminar	14	66.66%	5	22.72%
6. Short courses e.g. STEP	13	61.90%	8	36.36%
7. Public Lectures	11	52.38%	5	22.72%
8. Other (specify)	1	4.76%	0	0%
	N = 21		N = 22	

TABLE 3

In-service in last 5 years	Cohorts A pre-1983	B post-1982
Science, music, movement, etc	23	26
Protective behaviours	2	5
Children with special needs, behaviour management	10	7
STEP, PET, etc.	2	0
Multiculturalism	2	0
Program planning, curriculum design	6	4
Aspects of professionalism	2	7
Computers	1	1
Other		2

TABLE 4

Influence of In-service, etc. on Program Planning	Cohorts A pre-1983*		B post 1982	
Greatly	10	47.61%	5	22.72%
Somewhat	8	38.09%	12	54.54%
Superficially	1	4.76%	2	9.09%
Not at all	2	10.00%	3	13.63%
	N = 21		N = 22	

*2 people did not list any in-service attempted in the previous two years but rated the influence of in-service as 'somewhat' and 'superficially' respectively.

TABLE 5

Program Planning processes used	Cohorts A pre-1983	B post 1982
Themes	28.5%	27.27%
Children's needs and interests	57.14%	59.09%
Resources available	10.00%	4.54%
Yearly goals	14.28%	27.2%
Values, philosophy	19.04%	9.09%
Maths, Science, Music experiences	14.28%	0%
Parents' skills and needs	19.04%	22.72%
Child development	14.28%	13.63%
No response	4.76%	0%

*dominant influences

TABLE 6

The Role of Philosophy in Program Planning	Cohorts A pre 1983		B post 1982	
Yes but no specific reason offered	15	71.42%	14	63.63%
Specific reasons for 'Yes'	4	19.04%	7	31.81%
No	1	4.76%	1	4.54%
Probably	1	4.76%	0	0%
	N = 21		N = 22	

The pilot study did reveal that many early childhood teachers continue to base their programs, to a greater or lesser extent, on the thematic approach, which is not a procedure advocated by any of the dominant theories of early childhood program planning. This behaviour is in keeping with the findings of Cohen and Schiller's (1988) survey of New South Wales early childhood programs. The pilot study revealed that a majority of the in-service workshops and seminars attended by teachers of all stages of development cater for participants who at the basic Survival and Consolidation stages as described by Katz (1977). It would appear that the College's professional, employing and funding bodies need to work towards developing and presenting a range of in-service experiences for early childhood teachers which would expose them to the more sophisticated in-service activities required by teachers at the developmental stages of Renewal and Maturity. Clearly the early childhood field has a way to go before it can argue that it possesses a body of knowledge peculiar to it which will help to add weight to its claim to be a profession.

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